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ABSTRACT

Within the context of a basic composition class, writing stories allows teacher and students to have a conversation about issues that are important to the class and creates a space for students in which they can work on developing particular kinds of textual attention. Assignments are designed with the following questions in mind: What can students talk about with authority at this point in the term? What issues would be good for the class to get out on the table first thing? What work would students need to do to address this kind of assignment. How can the instructor ensure that it is work that will pay off for them in the context of the course? In response to an assignment that requires students to write a fictional sketch in which two characters have a mutually worthwhile conversation about a passage the class read as a whole, students usually did one of two things in their first draft: they either paid attention to the part of the assignment that asked them to work with a passage from a specific text in order to say something about the point of writing, or they wrote an interesting story. One student's story presented for class discussion the idea that silence can be excruciating. The students created actions in their stories that suggested ways of dealing with, rather than merely succumbing to, the difficulties involved in thinking through, writing about, and talking about ideas. (Two assignment handouts are included.) (SAM)

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Finding and Creating Voices
Through Story-Writing in the Composition Classroom

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Vocabularies are crossing circles and loops. We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or to be confined by.
A.S. Byatt

About a year ago, a friend was putting together a panel for this conference and she asked me if I would be willing to give a talk on a kind of assignment I have used in my composition classes. I mostly teach Basic Writing, a course that, in our university system, is expected to teach underprepared readers and writers how to do the work they will need to do in college. The assignment that my friend, Carolyn Ball, was interested in was one in which I asked students to write stories. It seemed like an odd kind of assignment to her.

And maybe it is.

But, within the context of the course as I have set it up, working on stories allows us to have a conversation about issues that are important to the class. And it creates a space for students in which they can work on developing particular kinds of textual attention. It's also important to me that they get to try out different voices in their writing.

I hope, through the course of this talk, to show what I mean with all this language about what story-writing can allow composition students. But it seems to me that I can't talk about what story-writing can do for students unless I talk about the methodological context within which this kind of assignment makes a kind of sense. And I can't talk about that context

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without talking about my teaching as a process of drafting and revision. And I can't talk about my own drafting and revision, it seems to me, unless I put some of my own texts on the table, in order to show how my theoretical commitments get enacted in one of the most conspicuous sites of my teacherly voice: the writing assignments I give my students.

So what has emerged from the thinking and work I've done for this talk is a putting-together of a few texts: two assignments and an excerpt from a student paper as well as the text that this talk is--the text that, for now, juxtaposes some moments of a teacher's voice with some moments of a student's voice and says that there is some connection between the two.

And I'll say right now, up front, that I don't have the time here to explore or develop these ideas the way I would like to. I'm working in broad strokes here, beginning to articulate issues that have preoccupied my attention as a teacher for a long time, issues that will continue to shape my pedagogies and my voices.

I've used the request for story-writing in a few different ways in a few different classes. On the first page of your handout, you have an example of an assignment, this one designed for the beginning of a term, before I even know the students, really.

I began my work of designing the assignment by trying to imagine what I wanted students to get out of doing it and so I asked myself questions like these:

What can students talk about with authority at this point in the term?

What issues would be good for us to get on the table first thing?

What work would they need to do in order to address this kind of assignment, and how can I ensure that it is work that will pay off for them in the context of the course?

All of these can be summarized in one large and important question: How can I prepare my students so that they have the opportunity to work with this assignment in ways that contribute both to their learning in the course and their success in addressing the assignment?

Let me say that another way: What can I do so that this assignment doesn't waste my students' time and set them up to fail?

That last question is one of the most important ones in my experience as a teacher and as a teacher who often deals with students who feel that they have been unsuccessful in school and who attribute that lack of success more to their own short-comings than to problems inherent in the tasks they were being asked to do and the lack of thought put into them. We'll see some of this play out in the student writing I'll talk about in a minute or two.

So, how did my response to these questions, and particularly that large question, play out in the way I constructed the assignment?

[READ ASSIGNMENT]

Assignment to Write a Fictional Sketch

In class, we have spent some time talking about definitions of reading and writing. For this assignment, you will write a sketch--a story in which characters speak to each other--about writing and reading. You may imagine it as an argument or as a discussion.

This assignment is an opportunity to find different ways of talking about language. When we talk about the characters you create in your sketch, we can ask interesting and useful questions of them. We can ask, "Who talks this way? What might be at stake for them in talking this way?" These are good questions to ask of any text, and it seems that by asking them of characters we create in stories, we can learn how to ask them of other texts. You can also use the activity of writing a sketch to try out different voices and get a handle on how it feels to move between voices--an important idea for college writers who have to move between different contexts and different people with different expectations of them. For example, what kind of talk might your history prof. expect you to use when you write an in-class essay exam on Greek history for her? How is that different from the way you might be expected to talk in a final project (10-12 pages long) for your Music and Life class, a project in which you explore the significance of music for your life? And how is that different again from the voice you might use if you decide to write an essay about your grandmother to send out to a magazine that publishes artistic pieces by local writers? You see, all writers need different voices to use, and they need to be sensitive to ways of moving in and out of them when they need them. While you're writing this sketch, you can think about this as you work on creating voices of different characters and keep thinking about it all term: who does this voice sound like?

Writing a sketch makes different demands of you and if, as we've said in class, a lot of us fall into thinking of the writing of essays as a kind of formula (introductory paragraph + 3 paragraphs + conclusion), maybe writing sketches can suggest another kind of thinking that we might draw upon in order to write essays. Writing stories can help us get out of the rut of writing formulaic, empty prose.

For Tuesday, write a sketch in which characters have a mutually worthwhile conversation about the Perl passage we read the first day of class. You might have people arguing about it, explaining it to each other, testing its limitations, putting other texts next to it (drawing on some of the introductions to textbooks that I have given you)--whatever you think will help you create a sketch that someone will be able to read in order to learn about ways of representing the point of writing. To satisfactorily address the assignment, your sketch has to teach something about the point of writing, it has to use the Perl passage, it has to represent a mutually worthwhile conversation about the text, and it has to use dialogue (several voices interacting with each other). You have to decide on all the other details.

So what you will be handing in next Tuesday will be a story (with good characters and a lot of dialogue) that you believe will help someone else understand something important about the point of writing. Make it a good story: we'll all be reading these and we'll all be working closely together for the next fifteen weeks, so make this a good start for us.

I'm attaching a sketch by William Coles from his textbook *Seeing Through Writing* for you to use as a model. If you are unsure of the conventions of punctuating dialogue, study his sketch to figure out the conventions.

You can see that in this assignment I was careful to try to explain to students why I was asking them to do the assignment. (And in passing, I can also point out that I hate certain features of both the assignments I'm including in this talk. They were the best I could do at the time, but I would certainly revise them before I used them again because there are places where the language is not careful enough, there are logical gaps, and there is a tone that I hear in them now that I don't like.)

Upon reflection, I decided that this single assignment wasn't enough. My students needed several assignments in order to prepare them to write, to give them ways of talking about the stories they had written, and to help them revise their first drafts. I created five or six more assignments, one of which is on the second page of your handout.

I give this assignment to students on the first day of class, as a way of beginning our conversation within the course.

[SUMMARIZE ASSIGNMENT]

Assignment for Class Discussion

The first formal assignment for this course will give you the opportunity to create a fictionalized conversation that will teach readers about writing. Since a lot of people have never had the chance to think much about the purpose of writing, it will be helpful for us to consider and discuss the ways some writers and teachers of writing have defined the purpose of writing. This will offer us some language and ideas to use as we talk together about writing this term. For our next class, you will analyze some texts about writing and compare and contrast different ways of thinking about the point or the use of writing, its ultimate purpose. Since you have been writing for many years now, you are in the position to do this as someone who knows about writing and the teaching of writing.

I have given you a packet of introductions to some composition texts--textbooks that are meant to be used by students in a composition class. The packet includes excerpts from Bartholomae and Petrosky, *Ways of Reading* , William E. Coles, Jr.,*Seeing Through Writing,* and Rorabacher and Dunbar *Assignments in Exposition.* These are all addressed to composition students like you. For our discussion on Thursday, you will need to have a good sense of what you understand these different writers to be saying, so the first step for the assignment is to read all of the introductions carefully, marking the places where the writer seems to be saying something that shows how he or she defines the purpose or significance of writing. Next, write some notes about how you would explain this writer's position on the purpose of writing, the significance of it, the use of it. What are the key terms for this writer? What do those key terms say about the way he or she thinks about writing? Your notes should be in the form of sentences and paragraphs, but your work will be in an exploratory form, rather than a drafted form that you have worked on and revised before giving me.

Making sense of difficult texts will be one of the things we work on all term. Your ability to do this is part of what determines whether or not you pass BW, so start working on this now: don't take it for granted that you understand the text after you have read it once. Make careful and thoughtful notes, and let your writing help you work out what you understand the texts to be saying. On Thursday, you can expect me to expect you to participate in the discussion of the text, you can expect me to draw you into the discussion if you're having trouble getting into it on your own, and you can expect me to ask you to go back to the texts to explain to the rest of us how you formed the reading of it that you have formed. Be prepared to move to specific places in the texts that will allow you to discuss what you understand the text to be saying or to raise particular questions you have had about the text so that we can work on them together. I'll collect your notes.

I hoped that by working with a few very different accounts of what writing (and composition classes) are about, students would have a more informed sense of how conversations about writing can go. But it's important to note that a lot of this work gets done in the discussion about these texts that we have in class rather than in the students' notes--in their notes students tend to work with texts in ways that aren't careful. They're inclined, in this first week of the term, to say that these different composition theorists are all saying slightly different versions of the same thing. But in our discussion in class, a discussion in which I follow up on my promise to ask them to take us to specific places in the text that allowed them to form their readings of these particular texts, in that discussion, we are able to both work out more careful understandings of the composition texts and to enact the kinds of conversations and reading that will shape our classroom work together.

So, given all this preparation and talk and thinking, what do my students produce?

I find that my students generally do one of two things with this assignment in their first draft: they either pay attention to the part of the assignment that asks them to work with a passage from a specific text in order to say something about the point of writing, or they write an interesting story. So what I have in my hands will be a stack of papers that include discussion of a text in the mouths of lifeless characters in no particular setting, with little attention to details of language, as well as first drafts of stories with real characters who are having a conversation about something--something other than the text the assignment asks them to work with, for the most part, and often the subject of these stories is "English class" in general--and the

treatment is either incredibly solicitous (an unruly student see the light and pursues English whole-heartedly for its own sake) or contemptuous (an opportunity to characterize English class as the evil, stupid and insulting waste of time it really is).

I take three or four of these texts--a representative sample of the work the class has done--and duplicate them, give them to my students as a packet and say, "We have a number of first drafts here. Our attention during the next two weeks is going to be focused on thinking about how these can be revised in order for them to be good stories that can teach someone something worthwhile about writing." My students have been equipped by their lives and experiences to address a problem like this, even though, in most cases, they have never been asked to.

I'd like to end my talk by turning our attention to an excerpt from a student paper. On the last page of your handout, you have two passages taken from Jamey's story. I'd like to read them and point out a few things about what I see going on.

Boy, oh, boy, thought Jake. This essay is sure to start an uproar in tomorrow's writing class. Of course, he was being sarcastic. He knew just as he told his roommate, "Even if the earth split in two my class would not even blink an eye and this essay sure as hell is not going to be the impetus for anything worthwhile. The whole thing is dry and I don't even know what <u>inchoate</u> means and it's in the first sentence. Plus nobody is going to give a damn since this class is forced on us. We'll just sit there staring blankly at one another for an hour as usual."

Oh, here it comes, he thought. He should have kept his mouth shut. Why couldn't Joe let him complain without having to give his almighty advice that he got straight from the cable box?

"Well, why don't you take the initiative and come up with a good discussion question for class if you're so worried about it? Lord knows it'll be a first."

"I'm not worried about it. I just can't stand the silence in the class and you know me. I hate participating in class. It makes me too nervous. I'm worse than anybody in my class. And since you haven't been off the couch or turned off the television in two days, I don't think you should be telling me what to do in class. At least I go to class."

"Whatever, man."

"Sorry Joe, I shouldn't be bitching to you about it. I just dread the thought of that class. You're so lucky to be done with it. Just take a look at what I have to write about. Here. Read it."

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Come on, Jake, get up, you only have half an hour before class. Why do I do this to myself? I always stay up until four in the morning watching the dumbest movies, say that I'll get up early and do my work before class. It never happens and I usually end up late for a three o'clock class. Damn and it's writing class, too. Maybe I'll get mugged on the way, at least then I'll have a good excuse. I better hurry. God forbid I'm late, then I won't be able to follow the in-depth discussion we are sure to have on Perl's essay. Ah, made it just in time.

"Well, class, you should have had ample time with the weekend and all, to have brainstormed and come up with some good ideas and thoughts for today's discussion. So let's get rolling."

Here it comes, thought Jake. Total silence and those oh too familiar blank faces including my own. I can't take this anymore. Say something somebody or I'm going to lose it.

"Come on now, people, you are in college and I'm not going to do all of the work for you," clamored the teacher.

Of course you won't, you haven't done anything for us yet, why start now? Somebody say something, this is taking forever. I'm losing it. It's lost. I'll have to say something, but what? What the hell. Here goes nothing. "What does inchoate mean?"

"That's not exactly what I had in mind, but can somebody help Jake out since he doesn't know how to use a dictionary yet?" replied the teacher.

God. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, thought Jake.

When I began this talk, I said that one of the reasons I ask students to write stories is that it allows us to get some important issues on the table, first thing. Jamey's paper is loaded with ideas, assumptions and issues that the class, as a group, needs to address as we define our work for ourselves.

What might we do, in a class discussion, with the idea that silence can be excruciating, for example?

What might we do with Jake's statement about why he can't read Perl: "the whole thing is dry and I don't even know what inchoate means"?

What might we do with the fact that Jamey's story and the stories of some of his classmates represent a gauntlet being thrown down at the foot of the teacher they imagine me to be, at the foot of this representative of the system that has singled them out for mandatory participation in this course called BASIC writing?

What good does it do to turn Jamey back to this story, in order to revise it, and with what kinds of questions and comments might I do that?

In the interest of helping this writer move his fiction to the point of it being able to suggest ways of dealing with some of the problems we can raise through the story, I can ask him to focus on a number of things:

Make it more complicated, I could say. I don't care if Mr. Hatch is a jerk, but right now he's a cartoon of a jerk. What might be the psychological dynamics that would allow him to be arrogant and whatever else he is in the classroom? And what else is he, by the way? Is he ineffective as a teacher? How can you get that across through the action of your story? This puts Jamey in the position of thinking seriously about what good teaching, so far as he is concerned, looks like. That matters to me because he is then more likely to be able to critique poor teaching, in whatever form he finds it in, wherever he finds it.

Because Jake's point of view represents Jamey's (this is not an assumption but came out of a conversation I had with Jamey), I can say, "I would like you to imagine your story being useful as a text for other students in Basic Writing or in other comp classes. How can you create the action of the story so that it suggests ways of dealing with certain difficulties rather than just succumbing to them?"

Acknowledgements

A few years ago, a friend and teacher, Bill Coles, taught a seminar on "Designing Fiction to Teach Composition," a course in which he gave us the opportunity to play off his ideas in his textbook *Seeing Through Writing*. Bill has been an important voice in my teaching and has taught me a lot about creating assignments.

At the same time I took the seminar from Bill another friend and teacher, Tony Petrosky, also took it. He was impressed by what he learned through trying to write fictional sketches, so he asked his students in a composition class to write stories in order to develop the ability to deal with multiple viewpoints. I took his idea about asking students to write stories and ran with it.